



# Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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Contact: Andy Scarborough (360) 902-1830  
Mike Louisell (360) 902-1813

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
P.O. Box 42560, Olympia, Washington 98504-2560

## **Egg safety awareness good for Easter and year-around**

OLYMPIA – Eggs are lauded as a powerhouse of nutrition, providing low-cost, high-quality protein and vitamins. And, while they are especially popular this time of year for eating and egg hunts, the state Department of Agriculture (WSDA) reminds consumers that common-sense handling of eggs is needed to prevent illness.

“Eggs are perishable and we encourage people to follow the same sanitation practices they use with raw meat, poultry or seafood,” said Andy Scarborough, food safety specialist. *Salmonella* bacteria are found in the intestinal tract of animals, people, reptiles, birds, and insects. The organism is sometimes found in raw eggs.

Food and preparation areas can also become contaminated if they are exposed to infected people or animals, including pets such as reptiles and turtles. Many illnesses from *Salmonella* contamination can be avoided if precautions are taken.

“Eggs should be refrigerated and sufficiently cooked,” Scarborough said. The American Egg Board says eggs age more in one day at room temperature than in one week in the refrigerator. Keep animals away from places that come in contact with food, such as kitchen counters and dining tables.

“Easter is a good time to teach children to clean their hands before eating foods or after handling pets,” Scarborough said. Children are less likely to wash their hands after playing with pets and have more hand-to-mouth contact than adults. Chicks and ducklings have been linked to salmonella infections after children receive them as Easter gifts.

### **WSDA inspections**

WSDA staff inspects egg production facilities, transportation vehicles, and retail outlets to assure a safe food source and a stable marketplace. “Egg inspections assure that all eggs sold in our state are labeled, graded, and handled properly by retailers and distributors,” Scarborough said.

Washington’s egg industry is worth \$62.4 million and is the state’s 15<sup>th</sup> most valuable commodity. In 2001, about 5 million hens laid more than 1.3 billion eggs! The industry employs 540 people and pays wages of \$12.6 million. Modern egg complexes require large capital investments for environmentally controlled housing, egg quality control, computers that control egg flow, and machines that package eggs gently.

“Egg layers are a totally different breed than chickens used for meat,” says Scarborough. “Hens raised for egg production are specially bred for feed efficiency, the number of eggs they produce, size or weight of eggs, and for laying high-quality safe economical eggs.”

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The grade and weight that are printed on egg cartons are determined by the interior quality of the egg and the appearance and condition of the eggshell. There are three consumer grades for eggs. Grade AA, A, and B. “U.S. Grade AA and A eggs are good for all purposes, but especially for poaching and frying where appearance is important. Grade B eggs, if available, is fine for general cooking and baking,” Scarborough said.

Tips to keep in mind when buying eggs:

- Purchase eggs from a refrigerated display case that is clean and sanitary.
- Do not buy eggs beyond the expiration, sell by, or best by date. Some cartons have a pack date. Generally eggs are best consumed within 30 days of packaging and processing.
- Take directly home and refrigerate promptly.

Tips for a safe Easter:

- Do not remove eggs from refrigeration for boiling or cooking until just before preparation.
- Choose eggs that are clean and do not show signs of cracks.
- Suggested cooking method. Cooking is perhaps the most important step to assure egg safety. Bring eggs to a rolling boil on medium heat slowly. Remove from the heat and let stand in the hot water for approximately 15 minutes.
- Rinse with cold water and refrigerate until the eggs are to be colored or color immediately and then refrigerate. Boiled eggs, which are less than two weeks old, may be difficult to peel.
- Put them back in their cartons and return to the refrigerator if you will not be decorating them immediately. Refrigerate them again right after dyeing or decorating them.
- Use food coloring or specially made, food grade egg dyes, nontoxic crayons, pens, paints, or other art supplies if the eggs are to be consumed.
- Decorated Easter eggs are safe to eat if they have not been out of the refrigerator for more than two hours or handled by unsanitary hands. Use decorated eggs within a week or less.
- If you are going to conduct egg hunts, consider using artificial eggs or discard the used eggs.

For more information on WSDA’s role in regulating the egg industry and egg safety visit the Web site at <http://agr.wa.gov/FoodAnimal/Eggs/default.htm>. For information on food safety from the state Department of Health, see <http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/sf/food.htm> and <http://www.doh.wa.gov/Topics/salmonel.htm>.

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